DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 570 CE 079 661

AUTHOR	Smith, Janet
TITLE	Literacy, Welfare & Work: Longitudinal Research Project. Final Report and Recommendations.
SPONS AGENCY	National Literacy Secretariat, Ottawa (Ontario).
PUB DATE	1999-10-00
NOTE	51p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Adult Basic Education; *Adult Literacy; Adult Programs; Adult Students; *Education Work Relationship; Educational Attitudes; Foreign Countries; *Literacy Education; *Outcomes of Education; Program Effectiveness; Student Attitudes; *Student Characteristics; *Welfare Recipients
IDENTIFIERS	*Manitoba; Welfare Reform

ABSTRACT

The 3-year Literacy, Welfare, and Work Longitudinal Research Project explored the complex relationship between literacy and employment within the context of welfare reform in Manitoba, in an attempt to identify the barriers to education and employment that adult learners experience, as well as the policies, programs, and support services that best enable them to move from welfare to work. This final report of the project is divided into three sections. In part 1, the life histories of adult learners in the study are collected, analyzed, and placed in chronological order according to theme. Part 2 then takes these experiences and perceptions and places them within a larger socioeconomic context, examining how welfare reform and the labor market affected students' lives. Part 3 contains conclusions and recommendations directed toward the following four main groups: learners, practitioners, social service agencies, and policy makers. Recommendations include the following: raising public awareness, support, and funding for literacy programs; enhancing resources and technology in literacy programs; revising welfare-to-work strategies; increasing student supports and access to programs; creating a wider variety of programming options to meet client needs; coordinating the links between literacy programming and other educational opportunities; improving communication and decision making among all stakeholders; and enhancing job creation and raising the minimum wage. (Contains a bibliography of 85 resources and a list of 8 organization's contact information.) (KC)

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Literacy, Welfare & Work:

Longitudinal Research Project

Final Report and Recommendations

Janet Smith

October, 1999

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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"Literacy opened doors for me. It opened me up inside and changed my life. If I didn't take literacy I wouldn't have had my job, or I wouldn't be so confident speaking to you now. I've got a job now, but that's not really my final placement. I'm still going further, and I'm not going to stop!"

"We were told that if we went back to school and didn't look for work we would get cut off... They can do anything they want to us, but I don't think it's right. If you are getting an education so you can get a job and get off the system, why would they penalize you?"

Literacy, Welfare, & Work

Longitudinal Research Project

Final Report and Recommendations

Written and researched by
Janet Smith

October 1999

Funded by the National Literacy Secretariat
(Human Resources Development Canada)

Acknowledgments

The three-year Literacy, Welfare and Work Longitudinal Research Project was made possible through generous funding from the National Literacy Secretariat (Human Resources Development Canada). The research was sponsored by the Coalition for Brandon Literacy Services.

I wish to thank my advisory committee members - Lauren Gawletz, Jan Mason, Roger Loewen, Allana Hillis, and Caroline Slimmon - who assisted me at various stages of the research project. Thanks also to Marie Matheson, the Province of Manitoba's Rural and Northern Adult Literacy Coordinator for her support and guidance over the past three years.

This research is dedicated to the many adult learners who shared their stories of struggle and success, and to the literacy instructors and other agencies who support them in their efforts to achieve their personal, educational and employment goals.

Janet Smith

Janet Smith
Brandon, Manitoba Canada
October, 1999

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Executive Summary

48% of Canadian adults have literacy problems that make it difficult for them to participate in many daily activities.

Literacy is more than the ability to read, write, and do math. Being literate in today's world means having the knowledge, skills, and confidence to participate as a full member of society. The renowned International Adult Literacy Study (IALS) defines literacy as "the ability to use printed information to function in daily activities,at home, at work, and in the community – to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Literacy, Economy and Society: Results of the First International Adult Literacy Survey. Statistics Canada: 1995, p. 14). Literacy development is an evolving, lifelong process in which individuals (and in fact whole cultures) display different 'faces of literacy' that change over time and within various contexts.

Literacy is central to the well-being of individuals, families, and communities as a whole, and is a key component to the overall social and economic development of nations. In Canada, however, literacy levels are among the lowest in the industrialized world. It has been estimated that 48% of Canadian adults have literacy problems that make it difficult for them to participate in many daily activities.

The human, social, and economic costs associated with low literacy in Canada exceed $10 billion a year.

Low literacy is inextricably linked to a number of social, economic, and political forces, including poverty and other forms of social injustice. Low literate adults tend to be among the poorest members of our society. They have only "two/three the income of other Canadians, are twice as likely to be unemployed, have poorer physical and mental health, and are much more likely to rely on some form of social assistance" (*NAPO Facts*: Oct. 1992). It has been estimated that the human, social, and economic costs associated with low literacy in Canada exceed $ 10 billion a year.[1]

As the global economy becomes increasingly information and technology-based, sophisticated literacy skills are essential. The IALS summarizes the recent economic shift in this way: "The emerging economy changes both the expectations and demands on the population. In this new context, information is abundant. Those lacking the skills and opportunities to access, organize and use this information in novel ways are at a disadvantage" (Statistics Canada: 1995, p. 23).

In this so-called "new economy" there is increased polarization between low-wage, low-skilled, unstable jobs and jobs that are well-paid, highly-skilled, and more secure (Shalla: 1998, p. 9). Certain populations are most vulnerable to this polarized labour market: single parents (particularly women), persons with disabilities, older workers, Aboriginal people, youth, and *undereducated workers*.

A vast amount of research has proved that education is crucial to employment. The higher the education level, the better the chances at employment, and the higher the income level. Literacy programming is an important stepping stone to employment. It enhances both academic and personal growth, which in turn increases students' employability and reduces their dependency on welfare or other forms of social assistance.

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1 These Canadian Business Task Force on Literacy estimates (quoted in Literacy Counts. Perrin, 1990. p. 1), include costs associated with lost earnings and unemployment (reduced purchasing power, fewer taxes, and increased demands on government-funded assistance programs, etc.

Despite the strong relationship between literacy and employment, literacy is not the *only* determinant of job success, nor is it a "quick fix." A number of personal and structural barriers -including the effects of poverty, childhood abuse, alcoholism, insufficient access to educational up-grading programs, and the job market itself- often make the transition from literacy programming to meaningful work both lengthy and challenging.

Recent welfare reform policies in Manitoba have resulted in both a reduction in welfare payments and a toughening of existing employment expectations placed upon social assistance clients, many of whom are in literacy programs. A number of students have been forced to leave programs completely, and others must juggle school and job search requirements. There is now increased pressure on literacy programs to link educational programming more closely with employment outcomes in order to make learners "work-ready" in the shortest time possible, preferably within one year or less. Literacy students and instructors alike have expressed concern that these policies may not assist low-literate adults to gain long-term self-sufficiency, but rather to cycle back and forth between welfare and low-wage, low skilled, insecure employment.

The three-year *Literacy, Welfare & Work Longitudinal Research Project (LWW)* explores the complex relationship between literacy and employment within the context of welfare reform in Manitoba. It sets out to identify both the barriers to education and employment that adult learners experience, as well as the policies, programs and support services that best enable them to move from welfare to work.

The *LWW Study* gives voice to the experiences of adult learners and instructors. It places them at the centre of the analysis, attempting to link their individual and collective stories to a larger socioeconomic and political framework. This approach offers a more fully contextualized understanding of learners' lives and the role that literacy plays in employment. The aim of the research is to provide a forum for discussion and action around public policy and adult education funding and programming, so that learners can fully realize their personal, educational, and employment goals.

Introduction

Literacy is critical to the well-being of individuals, families, communities and indeed entire nations.

> *Simply stated, literacy is important. Society rewards individuals who are proficient and penalizes those who are not, whether expressed in terms of employment opportunities and job success or active social, cultural and citizenship participation in society. Literacy is also important to nations, as these skills are building blocks. They enable the creation of a labour force capable of competing in a changing world - a key step to economic growth and improvement of the human condition. They are the cornerstones of democracy and the exchange of knowledge and information.* (Reading the Future: A Portrait of Literacy in Canada. "Highlights from the Canadian Report" Statistics Canada: 1996)

Literacy is critical to the well-being of individuals, families, communities and indeed entire nations. Literacy programs provide adult learners with important opportunities for both personal and academic growth, which in turn assist them to participate more fully in all aspects of society. Research has shown that increased education leads to better health, improved self esteem and better educational success for one's children, as well as increased employability and higher incomes.

While literacy education clearly enhances employability, it should not be characterized as a cure-all. A number of complex factors affect one's ability to find and keep a job, including personal and systemic barriers, and the job market itself. The *Literacy, Welfare and Work Study* attempts to uncover some of the major barriers that adult learners face, as well as the supports they require in moving from welfare to work.

Methodology

The LWW study was divided into three yearly phases. In Phase One *(Literacy, Welfare and Work: A Preliminary Study* 1997), focus group interviews were held with a select number of Manitoba literacy practitioners, students, and other informants. These interviews identified some of the key issues and questions regarding the relationship between literacy and employment within the context of welfare reform. Pertinent data on adult education, the labour market, and welfare legislation was also reviewed. The findings became the framework for a more in-depth analysis of the connections between literacy, welfare and work.

In Year II *(Literacy, Welfare & Work: A Case Study of Seven Adult Learners:* 1998), a small group of adult learners from Brandon, Manitoba was asked to participate in a two-year ethnographic case study which documented their life stories (including their education and employment histories) using interviews and participant observation techniques.[2] By placing their past and current experiences within the overall context of their lives, this holistic approach uncovered a number of subtle and often complex connections between literacy and poverty, abuse and poor health, and identified how these issues may have affected the students' abilities to become gainfully employed.

2 Ethnography can be described as "the art and science of describing a group or culture" (Fetterman: 1989, p.11). It involves the observation, description and analysis of social groups as they engage in daily activities.

In this third and final phase of *LWW*, case study participants continued to be tracked as they proceeded with their education and/or employment plans. Comparative interviews were also conducted with a total of eighteen literacy students (who were either currently on social assistance or had been in the recent past), thirty-four instructors, five social service providers, as well as numerous key informants from a variety of regions and programs in the province. The collective results from the three-year study were then compiled in this Final Report.

Not only does (ethnography) have a very long history, but it also bears a close resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of their world... The ethnographer participates, either overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned. (Atkinson: 1989, p. 2)

Study Limitations & Uses

Like most applied research, *LWW* was conducted under certain restrictions (eg. time and financial resources), and with respect for the needs of various target groups under study. Observation and interviews had to be conducted within a specific time frame and under contract deadlines. Several case study participants moved away or were not always available for interviews. In addition, requests for interviews and statistics on literacy demographics were consistently denied by various government departments, making it difficult to compare the *perceptions* of respondents with *actual statistical information*.

Initially there was concern that the limited number of case study participants might not reflect the full range of experience within the adult literacy population. Ethnographic studies, however, do not have to rely on large sample groups. The strength of ethnography is in its ability to describe in the fullest detail the complexities of the group under study, regardless of size.[3] It was felt that, by comparing the case study group with a number of other students, instructors, key informants and literacy researchers, a good triangulation of data would also be obtained.[4] According to at least one instructor, the collective stories reflect the reality of many adult learners she has worked with over the past 20 years:

> *Everything I read in the stories, I have heard time and time again. What Leslie (pseudonym) said, for example, it's not just one person speaking. She reflects the stories of twenty other students that I know.*

As much as possible, I have allowed the voices of the informants to speak for themselves. A variety of direct quotes from learners, instructors, literacy researchers and others are used to highlight the main points in this study. No real names or other identifying information on key informants are used in this report. It is hoped that this research will spark discussion and debate, and that it will have positive, practical applications for the literacy community, students, and policy-makers alike.

3 For other examples of this type of in-depth ethnographic case study of adult learners, read the works of Hannah Fingeret (1997), Sheryl Gowan (1994) and Lorri Nielsen (1989)

4 "Triangulation is defined as "the use of several different methods to test the same finding ... In the best of all worlds, your research design should bring more than one research method to bear on the topic" (Babbie: 1992, p. 109)

Report Layout & Design

This Final Report is divided into three sections. In Part I: *Students' Lives*, the life histories of adult learners in this study are collected, analysed, and placed in chronological order according to theme. Part II: *Literacy, Welfare & Work* then takes these experiences and perceptions and places them within a larger socio-economic context, examining how welfare reform and the labour market impact on students' lives. Part III contains *Conclusions & Recommendations*. These recommendations were gathered from a variety of primary and secondary sources, and are directed toward four main groups: learners, practitioners, social service agencies and policy-makers.

The graphic design chosen for the *LWW study* represents the strength and courage of the many adult learners who continue to challenge barriers while attempting to reach their chosen goals. This report is dedicated to all of them.

PART I:
STUDENTS' LIVES

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Student Stories

You learn lots when you are a teacher. When students share their life stories you see the extent of the 'school house damage' they have suffered. For example, if you speak out of turn you are punished. All kinds of things. I had an older woman in my class once who curled up into a little ball at her desk when she started to talk out loud and share her story. All her life she had been ignored and literally shut away in a closet because she was different; because she was considered a slow learner. (Instructor)

A number of similar issues showed up time and time again, suggesting a common pattern of experience that affects many adult learners.

In order to understand why students drop out of school and how they experience life as low-literate adults, it is important to examine the complex web of factors that shape their lives, including their education and employment histories. In interview sessions, students were asked to talk about their experiences during early childhood, school years, and into adulthood. A number of similar issues showed up time and time again, suggesting a common pattern of experience that affects many adult learners. These themes are outlined here in chronological order, and include quotes that best highlight the collective thoughts of the respondents in the study.

Researchers are just beginning to uncover the relationship between literacy and abuse, and the extent to which learning is impacted by childhood trauma.

Childhood/Early Years

With very few exceptions, the learners in the *LWW* study spoke of **difficult, even traumatic, childhoods.** Most grew up with inadequate parental guidance or structure. A number of participants also experienced physical and sexual abuse, the effects of family alcoholism, and a general fear of violence.

While these stories are not new to people who work in the field of adult literacy, researchers are just beginning to uncover the relationship between literacy and abuse, and the extent to which learning is impacted by childhood trauma. According to researcher, Jenny Horseman, "those who grew up in violent and chaotic homes may have little experience of seeing regular efforts lead to results. As children, such learners are unlikely to have been given the support or space to work at learning something regularly... and see the results of their own persistence". *(But I'm Not A Therapist*: Discussion Paper. Jenny Horseman 12/22/97). The long-term effects of abuse on education include an "inability to pay attention, acting out, or being barely 'present'" (Horseman: 1997, p. 15).

The following excerpts reflect some of the dialogue surrounding adult learners' childhood experiences:

Most of my life up until now has been negative. I'm just getting started with the good stuff. I don't have many memories of those years. What I saw when I was little... all those parties and having to step over drunk people and not getting enough sleep... My parents just weren't there for me... I had no guidance and I started to hang out with the wrong groups.

I didn't have a childhood back then because we were always moving. I can't remember us having get-togethers for Christmas and that. It's as if my mind is blocked from that. All I remember is going to school and every time my dad came,the next thing I knew we were moving.

As a kid I was sexually abused from the age of fifteen. I guess that had an effect on my life. It took away my childhood. I never learned how to love. I grew up a bitter person. And I didn't like the way I was growing up. It didn't make me feel good inside. It's like a lot of walls that build up and you're in the middle.

School Years

It was awful. From the time as far as I could remember. I remember falling from a stairway in the first foster home and falling from a bunk bed and things like that, but it was people that did that to me. . . .I had broken arms, broken legs that were healed not the right way, but I was able to move around. I know it sounds so unreal; so unbelievable. But that's what happened to me. Then it was – I don't know – jumping from one abuse to another. . . it went on and on for years and years. I just didn't tell anybody because it was always on my mind: 'It's your fault'.

Respondents were also asked to talk about school, including when and why they dropped out. All of them left school before completing high school, some as early as Grade 3. A few students recalled having had some positive experiences with school, confirming the importance of supportive teachers and family members.

My family supported me.. I was struggling with school work. But my mom wouldn't let me throw it away. She'd sit me in the chair and say you'd better do it or I'll tie you to the chair and you'll do it. Sounds cruel, but my mom had a learning disability like I do and so she wanted me to do better than she did. Like I want for my kids.

My brother was a counselor and he encouraged me. Then there was a math teacher. Same thing with the gym teacher and the principal. I was always getting into trouble and was sent to the principal's office every day. He just talked to me and said I was a bright student and he didn't want to see me getting into too much trouble. . . There was one teacher I didn't get on with, but I liked the teachers and they encouraged me."

For the majority of students however, these supports were not enough to keep them from dropping out. They spoke mostly of **negative school experiences,** including the effects of racism and neglect or even abuse by teachers. This was particularly true of Aboriginal learners who had attended residential schools.

A number of students received little or no help for their learning disabilities as children, and were streamed into vocational programs that lacked a strong academic component. Insufficient parental support or guidance with school work was another common theme. Falling behind their peers, many turned to violence or alcohol as a coping mechanism. The majority of women in the study became pregnant at a young age and left school.

Here is a sampling of responses from one focus group interview:

JS: When did you leave school and why?

When you're a kid, if you're different, whether fat or whatever, you're the one that gets picked on. . . Some people just keep going and going and even if you ignore them they'll keep going until they get you to your breaking point. I couldn't take it no more so I ran away when I was sixteen years old. I was in Grade 8.

My mom died when I was about eleven yrs. old, and then I was on my own. Well, I lived with my dad, but he didn't give me any structure to follow. I didn't have a time to come home, when I had to go to school, eat, or anything. I went to elementary school at that time, but not

I didn't have a time to come home, when I had to go to school, eat, or anything. I went to elementary school at that time, but not regularly. There was just no structure in my life.

My grade 10 teacher used to always put me down. I don't know if he had something against me. He helped the other students out no problem and would walk them through the questions. Then I'd go and ask him and he said, "You know how to do it. Go and sit down." I told him, "You know, you're always treating me like this. It's people like you that make people like me drop out." He said, "People like you shouldn't waste my time.

regularly. There was just no structure in my life... Then when I was fourteen years old I took the bus and went to BC to live with some friends. I didn't go to school at all there. I just stayed home and cooked and cleaned for them. That's also about the time when I started drinking. I moved back home and went back to school on and off for awhile. I was still in grade 6 when I was 16 years old. I felt too old for the other kids, and I was also too shy to stay.

I was going to school for a while... I must have been about nine or ten years old and my foster mom would say "What is school going to do with you? It's not going to do you any good. I'd rather have you here. Clean up the house" and stuff like that. At times I had to stay home and when I went back to school I couldn't learn because I was so far behind. I used to just fool around then, because I didn't know how to study or learn. She never knew I used to play hooky. That was the escape time that I had. I used to just be in the bush with a friend. It was fun. I liked doing that – it was wrong but it was the only time that I felt safe...Then I turned fourteen and I met my husband. I was in grade 7. Somehow I got to grade 7. I don't know how I got there. They must have just kept passing me because of my age... I didn't complete my school because of the abuse I guess – that was the main thing. I quit school. Got pregnant on purpose with my boyfriend and that led to an abusive relationship. I just jumped into another abusive relationship which I thought was normal.

Going to school was no good. I remember in about grade two that the teachers were abusing me. They hit me on the head with a ruler because they thought I was cheating, but I wasn't... The kids used to call my dad a Blackfoot, and me a squaw. They'd tease me because I couldn't pronounce my words right... At that time I was told I couldn't stay in school because I wanted to fight. I think they were just doing it to Native people. I was teased and they would call me names... It sure wasn't a good feeling. It hurt me. Sad. They would call me these names. That was the only way I knew back then was to get mad to cover my hurt feelings... I had to be tough in order to get somewhere I guess. I had to be a mean tough girl. Even though I was hurting inside I didn't know how to reach out. My mom would say – and that's what was in my head – that I was dumb... If I brought the wrong thing she would say " You should know. You're going to school; you can read." I don't think I could read properly then too.This was in grade 7. It was like that all my life. If I failed I just got passed on. Nobody took the time. My mom didn't take the time. Those were the barriers that stopped me.

I faced quite a few barriers. I never had a chance to stay in one school. I was always moving all over the place. Most of the time I spent in the principal's office. I would pick fights with students to see what they're like... I had problems with a lot of teachers because of my disabilities.One of my problems was I was a slow learner – stuff like that. When I was going to school they didn't know what disabilities were.They thought a student was just a student. My last years in school I was in an OS class.That's the lowest possible grade you can go through school...OS is the bottom. It is strictly for mentally handicapped and disabled people. All they teach you in there is just basic shit.

The first school I went to was in English. I spoke Cree at the time, and I didn't understand anything. The teacher was really mean with me. She'd take all my school supplies, my glasses, put black tape across my mouth. Make me sit in front of the classroom and put a big dunce cap on me. I spent the whole school year like that.

My father never gave me any confidence as a kid. He always put me down saying I couldn't learn this or I wouldn't get my license first time, and stuff like that. I can always hear him saying to me that I wouldn't succeed.

Well, I'm one of those (residential) school persons, and I had only a Grade 3. My mom put me in there when I was four years old, and she wonders to this day if I was at school that long, why do I only have a Grade 3?... Being raised in a boarding school you were ashamed of being an Indian because they always called you savage and you couldn't speak your language... I remember that in school, if I couldn't get something a nun would grab me and say, "Oh, you're stupid." And then I learned to put a block up. If she said I was stupid and I couldn't learn anything, then I would go deaf. I would just shut my mind to everything she was saying.

Poor children tend to be streamed into non-academic programs, and face a higher chance of growing up undereducated and underemployed.

Another common theme to emerge from the interviews was the effect of **poverty** on respondents' childhoods. Research has shown that poverty affects every aspect of a child's mental, physical, and intellectual development. Poor children tend to be streamed into non-academic programs, and face a higher chance of growing up undereducated and underemployed (Mitchell, Alanna, "The poor fare worst in schools", Globe & Mail, Toronto, April 18, 1997). According to educator, Benjamin Levin, the effects of poverty on education are complex and multifold:

Children who live in poverty are more likely to have an unstable home environment where stimulation and incentives for learning are either unaffordable, inaccessible or unthought of. They will come to school with less background in the kinds of things which schools teach and value - reading, working in groups and obeying rules of institutions. They are more likely to come to class hungry and to be preoccupied with concerns other than those which schools put in front of them... But poor students are also penalized because their experience is different from that of the curriculum and the teachers. Things which students from poor families may know about, or are able to do, are not given any value in schools. Thus, students may have greater difficulty in doing what the schools want, while at the same time their own knowledge and beliefs are devalued. (Winnipeg Social Planning Council, *Specifics*, Winter, 1991/92).

The impacts of child poverty were borne out by the majority of respondents in the LWW study:

I never went to school in my life, because Mom and Dad were poor and I had to stay home and look after the kids. There was no school where we were living way out in the bush and Mom and Dad had to go out and support our family. I never had a chance to go to school.

I remember what it was like when it was ice cream day and mom couldn't afford to buy me ice cream - or hot dog day. Or a pair of shoes.

I grew up on welfare. The other kids teased me but it didn't bother me because they knew how far they could push me. They knew what would happen if they pushed me and if I got mad they would leave me alone.

I didn't know anything about money. I remember going to school without having lunch though.

How about going to school with no shoes on; shorts in the middle of winter, and a t-shirt? That's all I wore. Didn't have a jacket. Didn't have any boots.

In 1978 my father passed away and my mother had myself, my brother, my grandfather and her two grandchildren that she was caring for and she was the manager of (a store). To keep the house running, a lot of times I was taken out of school to watch the little ones. At the time it didn't really bother me because I knew my mom was trying so hard. We had just lost my father and I thought I could make up for it. Unfortunately I didn't do it that way. As I got into my teen years I started getting into drinking and hanging out with friends and forgot about school altogether. Every year my mom would make me enroll in school and she tried her best to send me but most of the time I would skip school. Then I made it to grade 4 and after that my mom kept me out of school a lot. When I was eleven, the elementary school I was in felt I was too old and that I should be with kids my own age. They sent me to Special Ed grade 7... I went to 7, 8, 9 and 10 – all Special Ed. I didn't complete anything in those programs as far as education.

Nearly one in three Canadian students leave high school before reaching Grade 12.

Adulthood

Many low-literate adults in the LWW study spoke about the isolation, fear, and shame they felt as a result of not reading well.

Students who drop out of school are more likely to be academically, socially, and economically disadvantaged. According to a 1990 study by the Canadian Labour Market and Productivity Centre, nearly one in three Canadian students leave high school before reaching Grade 12, making the drop out rate in Canada "one of the highest in the industrialized world" (Perrin: 1990, p. 7).

The Canadian results of the IALS study reveal a clear relationship between educational attainment and literacy levels: "Most adults with no secondary education are at level 1. Among those with some secondary education, most are at Level two. The largest number of adults who hold a high school diploma perform at Level three or lower" (Statistics Canada: 1996, p. 5). The reasons for this high drop-out rate are many, but some suggest that " school leavers' low literacy levels may have contributed to their decision to leave school before graduation; therefore literacy may be a *determinant* of educational attainment as well as a *consequence* of it" (Statistics Canada: 1996, p. 5).

The effects of low-literacy on self esteem and quality of life have been well-documented. (see, for example, Merrifield: 1994). Many low-literate adults in the LWW study spoke about the isolation, fear, and shame they felt as a result of not reading well:

It was really embarrassing for me when people found out I couldn't read and write. I used to go to the school in the morning and talk to my child's teacher instead of writing a note.

I was able to read and write ok. But as for math – no. I had a hard time with that. Anybody could rip me off. If I went into a store I had a hard time with counting. I was even scared to go to a bank.

I lived in my own little world. All I knew was music and sports; nothing else.

I ran away from my community because I didn't want my friends to know that I was illiterate. It was really hard to get around. I couldn't travel. I couldn't read the signs. I didn't even know how to read grocery lists or how to shop. I would walk around the store and look at someone else's groceries. If you have a lack of education it affects your lifestyle. How you act. And then you start hiding. I hid. I couldn't even go outside. I found myself really stupid because I couldn't read. That was the hardest part.

If you have a lack of education it affects your lifestyle. How you act. And then you start hiding. I hid. I couldn't even go outside. I found myself really stupid because I couldn't read. That was the hardest part.

Without the education, skills, and personal networks to assist them in obtaining a well-paying job, many high school drop-outs are forced to move back and forth between social assistance and working seasonal, part-time, and/or low-waged jobs. A number of students in the *LWW Study* described looking only for work that required minimal reading or writing, such as house-keeping and manual labour jobs. Their lack of educational credentials,often used by employers as a screening devise, made it even more difficult for them to "get their foot in the door." Most of the respondents had children by this time, and lived well below the poverty line.

Without the education, skills, and personal networks to assist them in obtaining a well-paying job, many high school drop-outs are forced to move back and forth between social assistance and working seasonal, part-time, and/or low-waged jobs.

A combination of factors, both personal and employment-related, eventually influenced them to make the decision to go back to school. Literacy education was seen as a necessary stepping stone to getting a grade 12, going on to post-secondary education and eventually getting a better job and "getting off welfare". Students also spoke of the importance of education for one's self esteem and sense of empowerment. The benefits of literacy training also extended to other family members, particularly their children. The importance of encouragement and support from family, friends, and others played a prominent role in their return to school.

For a while there I was thinking nobody really cared whether I achieved my goal or didn't. But there are a lot of people who say they'd like to see me finish school instead of staying at home and being on welfare. They would rather see me get a scholarship or a diploma to go to university, college. That's what keeps me going.

I feel it's important for us to get educated. When I went out there trying to get a job I became really down and my self-esteem got worse. I thought, "Nobody wants me. I'm useless." So, I really found that coming to these literacy classes made a big difference.

When I went looking for other work I had trouble filling out the application forms. I always told everyone I had a grade 9/10 because I thought I'd never get a job if I told the truth. I only had a grade 6 education. When I finally got the nerve up to tell my worker that I couldn't read the application forms, she agreed to let me go back to school full time. I was always told that if you lied on your application and said you had an education you'd get a job. I always lied on my applications but even then I only got jobs cleaning hotel rooms. I hate that. The pay is bad. You need a grade 12 if you're going to get a better job.

When I became a young adult I went to social services for a couple of months and then I found a job doing cleaning. After losing my job at first I was very upset and I didn't want to do anything and I didn't really care and stuff. But I have a little girl who is five and she started school last year... I woke up one morning and was scared to death of the day she would come home and say, "Mom I need some help." It scared me so badly... So I want to go back to school and I want to learn all I can to better myself and give my daughter a better future so we won't have to be on assistance.

If I had not taken literacy classes, I would have still been working in a minimum wage job or dependent upon social assistance. I would have been a loner, staying at home all the time and not communicating with many people.

Literacy changed my life. Before I had my education my world was very small. Now I know what's happening in the world, because I can read the news and understand it. It has given me confidence. It taught me to believe in myself. If you've got confidence and believe in yourself, anything is achievable.
I'm doing this for my kids. I want to be able to read to them at night, help them with their homework, stuff like that. I want them to be proud of me. I want to show them that I can do it; so that they know that learning is important."

Despite the knowledge that education is crucial to their own and their families' well-being, many adults find it extremely difficult to return to school. Internalized fears about schooling, shame and a lack of confidence in their own ability to learn make it hard for many learners to reach out for help. As one woman put it, "I didn't decide overnight. It took thirteen years to put my plan into action." Recent changes to welfare legislation however, have made the return to school even more challenging for many adults.

The value of education is that you have more knowledge, and it will show in the way you talk and act. You can talk about mature things. The way I see it, education gives you skills; more to think about. It teaches you what is needed in the workforce. I think of it as a need, like life. It's a basic need.

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PART II:

LITERACY, WELFARE & WORK

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The Relationship Between Literacy & Employment

Education is the greatest means of preventing poverty and it is the quickest route to employment.

- former Manitoba Premier, Gary Filmon

Research has shown that as literacy levels rise, so do levels of employment and self-sufficiency. The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), in its landmark study, found a direct correlation between labour force participation and literacy levels. People with lower literacy skills tend to be unemployed for longer periods of time and receive lower wages than those with higher literacy levels. They are more likely to rely on some form of social assistance or to cycle back and forth between welfare and low wage jobs (Statistics Canada: 1996, p. 8). According to the U.S. National Adult Literary Survey, The likelihood of being on welfare goes up as literacy goes down; conversely, the number of weeks worked during the year, average weekly wage and annual income all rise with literacy levels. (Quoted in D'Amico: 1997, iii).

The official unemployment rate for Manitobans at the lowest literacy level (Level 1) is nearly 26%, compared with a 4% unemployment rate for highly educated workers.

The official unemployment rate for Manitobans at the lowest literacy level (Level 1) is nearly 26%, compared with a 4% unemployment rate for highly educated workers (Literacy Partners of Manitoba, Lets Talk About Literacy, Sept., 1999). Many labour market specialists say that actual unemployment rates are much higher, since they do not take into consideration the number of 'discouraged workers': (those who have given up searching for jobs) or the number of underemployed workers: (those who would like full-time jobs but cannot find them) (Schellenberg and Ross: 1997).

By the Year 2005, 40% of all job openings will require at least a four year university degree. Another 60% will require a high school diploma.

Limited reading, writing, and math skills mean fewer opportunities for employment. Today's labour market demands higher literacy levels and academic credentials than ever before. Even manual and service sector jobs often require a minimum of Grade 10 education, as well as computer literacy, good communication and problem-solving skills, and customer relations. Human Resources Development Canada estimates that by the Year 2005, 40% of all job openings will require at least a four year university degree. Another 60% will require a high school diploma.[5]

Manitoba economists are beginning to speak of a severe 'skills shortage': too few highly skilled workers for today's technologically-advanced workplace. According to a recent Canadian Federation of Business survey, approximately 52% of Manitoba member companies have trouble finding skilled workers compared with 39% in Alberta ("Manitoba Hard Hit by labour shortage" Brandon Sun: July 5, 1999).

5 Source: HRDC Powerpoint presentation, Nov., 1998

Adult education programming provides an important opportunity for low literate adults to develop the basic skills and confidence they need to further their education and enhance their employability. While the relationship between literacy training and employment outcomes is not a linear one, education is still one of the best methods we know of to enhance employability and to move people from welfare to work:

> *(Adult education) remains the welfare to work strategy most clearly linked to long term employment impacts. Moreover, even for individuals who succeed at getting jobs, education remains central to the ability to advance on the job and to lift oneself above the ranks of the working poor.*
>
> (D'Amico: 1997, p. iv)

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Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

Teaching people to read and write won't create jobs that don't exist, make it easier to get by on the minimum wage, or get rid of discrimination.

(National Anti-Poverty Organization: Illiteracy and Poverty, 1992)

The shift to global economics has created an increasingly polarized labour market between jobs that are highly-skilled, secure, and well-paid, on the one hand, and those that are low-skilled, low wage and part-time on the other.

While low literacy has been shown to be a major impediment to employment, it is not the only factor. The nature of the labour market itself – with its shortage of what some people have come to call "real jobs" – has created new challenges for adults with limited education and other barriers. According to Globe and Mail columnist, Bruce Little,

> *Canada's job market is less able now than it was a decade ago to offer economic security to people in low-income families, many of whom already work. The reasons are familiar - too few jobs and low wages in many of the jobs the poor hold.* ("Prospects for the Poor Get Poorer", Globe & Mail, Toronto, March 24, 1997)

The shift to global economics has created an increasingly polarized labour market between jobs that are highly-skilled, secure, and well-paid, on the one hand, and those that are low-skilled, low wage and part-time on the other. Certain populations are most vulnerable to the current labour situation: single parents (mostly women), persons with disabilities, older workers, Aboriginal people, youth, and *undereducated workers*.

Most of the jobs available to lower educated people are entry level positions. These jobs tend to offer little security or benefits, and part-time hours at minimum wage.

Students and instructors in the *LWW Study* were well aware of these rapidly-changing labour market conditions, and of the need to up-grade their skills and education if they were to compete for employment. However, they voiced concern about a shortage of work, particularly in rural and northern communities, and about the **proliferation of minimum wage, entry level jobs.** These tight labour conditions have also led to artificial inflation of both the academic credentials and prior work experience necessary for employment. Jobs that used to be filled by lower-educated people are now being snatched up by those with high school diplomas or higher.

> *We have university graduates in our town who cannot get work. My students aren't going to get a job ahead of them. It's just not going to happen.*

> *I have skilled people coming to my literacy class taking computers because they don't have a job.The possibility of them getting a job is so slim because there's so much competition out there.*

Most of the jobs available to lower educated people are entry level positions. These jobs tend to offer little security or benefits and part-time hours at minimum wage. At just $ 6 an hour, a person working full time at minimum wage in Manitoba earns approximately $ 12,000 a year, putting them well below the poverty line. 62% of minimum wage earners in the province are women, making it an issue that disproportionately affects women and children, contributing both to the *"feminization of poverty"* and the province's high *child poverty rates* (Black: 1998).

(My students) are saying: 'I don't want a minimum wage job. Where am I going to fit into the job market? I can't live like that for the rest of my life'. Minimum wage jobs are all they are going to get.

What is the minimum wage in this province? It's about $6 an hour. Thats how much it costs to get a good, reliable babysitter. So, you're basically working to pay babysitting costs.

Adding to the already significant barriers to employment faced by low literate adults are issues of **racism and other forms of discrimination**. According to one student, while he would have no problems finding work, others in his class (particularly women and Aboriginal people) would face barriers:

As far as the job market that I'm going for is concerned, it's pretty good because it's a growing industry. For others in our group – I'm talking about different women and Native people and stuff – it's harder for them because of the demand. The jobs that they are looking for just aren't out there. The only reason (the employers) want the work experience is they get free labour. Everybody wants something for nothing and everybody wants to give you such a low wage that it's not even worth going out to look for work. Benefits for most of those companies are poor. Job security is hard to find.

Instructors are well aware of the employment difficulties faced by their students. They know that entry level jobs will not provide them with a living wage (particularly if they are trying to support a family), and that they require adequate time to complete their literacy training and go on to higher education if they are to move beyond welfare or the ranks of the working poor. Students also need a variety of supports along the way, including childcare, transportation, adequate financial resources, personal and employment counselling. With the implementation of recent welfare-to-work legislation however, many literacy programs are being encouraged to prepare students for entry level employment within the shortest time possible. Many instructors are concerned about the effects that these policies are having on their students and overall programming.

Welfare in Manitoba

Our focus is on education programs which are going to lead clients directly into employment, hopefully one year in duration.

(Employment and Income Assistance Spokesperson)

On September 16, 1996, Manitoba passed Bill 36: a series of welfare-to-work policies which were designed to move people off of income assistance and into the labour market within the shortest time possible.

The majority of adults enrolled in literacy programs receive some sort of government income assistance. Over the last few years, sweeping changes to income assistance programs have taken place across Canada. These "welfare reforms" are largely a result of the 1996 implementation of the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST), which replaced the federal Canada Assistance Plan, or CAP, as it was known. CAP funded social assistance, health and post-secondary education with the provinces on a cost-shared basis. With the introduction of CHST block funding, significant changes to the welfare system took place:

- virtually all national conditions or standards were eliminated (except for the prohibition of residency requirements;
- health, welfare, and post-secondary education were combined under the same block funding apparatus; and
- substantial reductions in overall payments to social programs occurred (an estimated 25% or $ 7 billion was eliminated over a 2-year period).[6]

Provincial governments in turn implemented a variety of policies intended to respond to the CHST. On May 1st, 1996 the Manitoba government announced cuts that would reduce payments to employable single person and couples without children. Then, on September 16, 1996, Manitoba passed Bill 36: a series of welfare-to-work policies which were designed to move people off of income assistance and into the labour market within the shortest time possible. Also referred to as 'Workfare', these initiatives were administered by the Department of Family Services and the Department of Education and Training (which includes the Literacy branch).

Under the new legislation, clients deemed 'employable' are expected to develop a personal case plan, which includes undertaking an active job search, and/or employment, education or training programs. Participation in these programs is dependent upon individual assessment by a case worker and must lead to self-support or reduced dependency on assistance within a reasonable time. Client benefits can be denied or reduced if the case plan is not followed (Province of Manitoba Municipal Assistance Program Manual. February, 1997, pp. 30-33).

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6 National Anit-Poverty Organization "*Monitoring The Impacts On Social Assistance Recipients Of Welfare Cuts And Changes: An Overview*" Oct., 1996.

7 The 'employable' category applies to all non-disabled single persons, non-disabled couples with or without children, single parents with children over the age of six, and single parents with dependent children who have taken an education or training program while on assistance. Source: *Employment and Income Assistance: A Bridge to the Future*" Manitoba Family Services pamphlet, p. two

While literacy education *may* be considered an 'employability enhancement measure' under the new legislation, it generally is considered a long-term investment and permission is granted on a case-by-case basis. According to several directors and spokespeople for Employment and Income Assistance (EIA), the trend is to support short-term employability training as opposed to longer-term education:

The trend is to support short-term employability training as opposed to longer-term education.

> *At present most clients have a 44 week window through the 'Employment First' (welfare-to-work) legislation to move clients into employment. Very much the mandate is employment, not education. . . We are expected to get you into a program that will lead to employment. If you don't cooperate with that, you'll lose your benefits. (EIA Director)*

Effect of 'Welfare-to-Work' on Students

The recent changes to welfare have had a significant effect on Manitoba's adult literacy population. Students in the LWW Study spoke of having to "jump through endless hoops" in order to convince case workers of their need for educational up-grading. Others expressed constant worries about being cut off if they didn't do well, or if their worker felt they were taking too long. A number of respondents described difficulties juggling school with welfare-to-work expectations. All felt that the rules imposed by the welfare system were both punitive and highly discretionary.

> *The only way I can really explain the welfare system is like being in jail. You're thrown out of jail on your ears and you're stuck with this responsibility with nowhere to go. The only way to explain the system is that you're stuck in one position and you can't move.*

All my life I've been trying to go back to school – going to city welfare, seeing my vocational worker... and all of you say no. I know I can do it and can do better than waitress all my life but I need your support.

> *I asked (my worker) if I could go to school full time but he turned me down . . . I started crying and he gave me a Kleenex and he said, "'Why are you crying? Don't you think you can do it?" And I looked at him and said, "No, I'm crying because I can do it. Because all my life I've been trying – going to city welfare, seeing my vocational worker... and all of you say no. I know I can do it and can do better than waitress all my life but I need your support." And it worked out. He said, "OK, you can go." I was so happy and thanked him for believing in me.*

> *Provincial (welfare) didn't even want me to go to school at all . . . They look at us and go, "He can work." We look big and strong, but they don't want to know us on the inside. And that's where we are really hurting the most is on the inside. And you have to put up with a lot of crap just to stay in school and it hasn't been fun.*

> *I don't know what it would be like to be on welfare and try to go to school nowadays. I did it one time on City welfare. I did try to go to school and they said either you go to school or work. I said I would go to school. They said, "If you go to school, you can't get welfare." There's always a catch. I said, "'How am I supposed to live?" They said, "Look for a job and work part time and go to school part time." I wanted to go to school full time. And my welfare officer was not very nice. He would say, "'Whose fault was that?" Like going to school was my fault. And he would put me down, saying: "'I'm not the stupid Indian that dropped out of school."*

I'm on a disability, but they (welfare) don't want me coming to school anymore... There's lots of us who want to go back to school for our education and they won't let us. They're already kicking people off welfare because they're not looking for work. Half of those people don't even know how to read or write, or they have a sickness. I know lots of them, but they won't talk to you. They're too scared to open their voice. I know this one lady who has her grade 6 and she wants more schooling. They kicked her out of school and want her to go back to work... it's like the welfare system doesn't understand us. We're just a number to them.

Poverty affects virtually every aspect of learners' lives, and creates or magnifies many of the stresses students cope with every day

Bill 36 also introduced **reductions in welfare payments** that increased the financial hardships already faced by many students. In 1996, single parent families with children over the age of six saw a 2% reduction in welfare cheque payments, while employable single people and couples without children lost up to 10%, putting social assistance recipients even further below the poverty line.[8]

Poverty affects virtually every aspect of learners' lives, and creates or magnifies many of the stresses students cope with every day. Poor housing, health problems, food insecurity, and a lack of transportation, recreation, and childcare are among the many difficulties faced by low income people. As one B.C literacy worker put it:

Being poor is exhausting - there are constant difficulties with housing, health, especially food... you can't expect people to concentrate on an empty stomach. I can't overemphasize this. it's not just a case of not having enough money for the bus. These people haven't had breakfast. And it's not a case of bad management - there's just not enough money. (in Literacy and Poverty: A View From the Inside - Literacy Training for Low Income People: Some Issues and Solutions. NAPO,1992, p. 6)

We survive on garage sales, the Sally Ann, low grade food. We haven't starved yet, but we don't eat that well.

Inadequate food and housing – two very basic needs – is common among the adult learner population, and has become even more of a problem following the cuts to welfare payments. Provincial shelter allowances do not cover the actual costs of housing in many municipalities, and social assistance recipients often end up taking money from other areas of their budget (mainly the food budget) to cover rent.[9] Inadequate or poor quality diets can cause difficulties with concentration and the ability to learn properly. Many students rely on soup kitchens and food banks to help feed themselves and their families.

We survive on garage sales, the Sally Ann, low grade food. We haven't starved yet, but we don't eat that well.

I'm on Provincial Assistance. I get $381 a month. My rent is $300. Welfare pays $285 and I pay the extra $15. I got to buy my food and

8 For example, "rates for single employable people were reduced from $ 458 to $ 411 per month. Rates fell from $ 774 to $ 692 for childless couples." (MacKinnon: 1999, p. 3

9 According to a 1997 study by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, for example, the average one-bedroom apartment in Brandon rents for $ 420 per month, which exceeds the Provincial welfare shelter allowance ($ 285 for a single person) by $ 135 (*Brandon Sun* Sept. 13, 1999)

When people are not able to eat well-balanced meals, live in sub-standard housing, and when their stress levels are high, they often suffer serious physical and mental health problems. If they are unable to read prescriptions or health education information, they are at a further disadvantage.

everything else out of the $81 per month left over. My food budget varies. Last month I got away with $50 because I stockpiled. This month I'm down to almost nothing, so it could go up again. I go to the soup kitchen for my main meal.

The water pipes froze in my apartment not too long ago, so I'm buying water. Over Christmas my fridge broke down, so I had to throw out over $100 worth of food. I haven't had a home-cooked meal for over nine years. I eat canned food mostly, no breakfast, lunch at the soup kitchen, and lots of coffee. When things get tight I cut back on my food budget. I don't abuse the system, like some people do. I do the best I can with the money I get (from assistance). I'd like to have a little bit more, maybe $100 to $200 per month so I could budget better. I could buy food, do my laundry. I also used to play sports (hockey, ringette, swimming, baseball), but I can't afford that now... They (welfare and other people) expect you to be in touch with the community, you know, get involved with sports and stuff, but how can you when you have so little money? It's hard.

The relationship between low literacy levels and poverty can also be seen in their combined effect on **health**. When people are not able to eat well-balanced meals, live in sub-standard housing, and when their stress levels are high they often suffer serious physical and mental health problems. If they are unable to read prescriptions or health education information, they are at a further disadvantage. According to the Canadian Public Health Association,

> *The impacts of poverty on the health of families is well-documented. Poor families are much more likely to live in over-crowded conditions, experience parental unemployment, disturbed family relationships and parental psychiatric disturbance. Households with the lowest incomes have, on average, the lowest health levels. (Health Impacts of Social and Economic Conditions:* Canadian Public Health Association Board of Directors Discussion Paper: March, 1997. p. 13).

Several students talked about the effects of poor physical or mental health on their education and on their prospects for future employment:

My health gives me problems. I had scoliosis and I'm diabetic and I've got bad arthritis. Sometimes I can't focus my eyes. It's very hard. And at night time I can't sleep because of my hot feet. If I don't eat every three to four hours I start shaking and get really sick and bad headaches... it's hard for me to get a job too because of my health problems. There's foods for diabetics and that's what I'm expected to eat, but I can't afford them, so I try to do the best that I can.

I have arthritis in my back and in my feet... I've also got sugar diabetes and it's really hard on me. Sometimes it's hard to make it into school when I'm really sick But they (welfare) dock you when you phone in sick.

I'm schizophrenic. Sometimes it's totally hard for me to walk out the door. That's why I'm glad my literacy tutor is there to come and get me in the morning for classes. Sometimes she'll drive me straight home if she knows I'm not feeling well.

It is stressful when I want to do something and I can't - like going to the movies, or a game, or bowling with my friends. The money I get is only for basic needs, not personal stuff. At times it's not often though. I have to borrow five bucks here and there, just till my cheque arrives. it's depressing. It gets me down. It takes a lot out of me . . . I'm very grateful to be getting the money I do get though. Don't get me wrong. It's just that sometimes I think it should be more. Some of these people, they say they worked hard all their lives, and they've suffered too, going to school and getting a career and all that. I know they've worked hard, but they also had support; financial support from their families. They had parents to back them up. I never had that.

I had was that one cleaning job went until 4:00 pm and my son gets home from school at 3:30. By the time I got home, it was already 4:30 pm so he was left alone for an hour or more when I worked. He was only six years old at the time, so that worried me a lot. I couldn't quit or I would lose my benefits.

Lack of money for basic student supports such as **childcare and transportation** creates another barrier for many low-income adults who want to return to school or work. Some social assistance clients experience difficulty convincing their workers of the need for a bus pass or daycare so that they can attend literacy classes. Subsidized spaces within licensed daycares are limited, meaning that many parents feel forced to choose between getting an education and/or employment and their child's safety. With the introduction of Bill 36, parents with children over the age of six are now deemed employable and should be actively looking for work. This has created additional safety concerns for many single parents, the majority of whom are women. As one former student put it:

I was told by welfare that I had to go and find a job.That was about the summer of 1996 I think. I knew that I had to go out and find a job, 'cause they said when your child was over 6 yrs. you had to or they would cut off some of your money. I did some cleaning for awhile . . . and got a few jobs on my own . . . I couldn't go to school 'cause my jobs took up too much time. Another problem I had was that one cleaning job went until 4:00 pm and my son gets home from school at 3:30. By the time I got home, it was already 4:30 pm so he was left alone for an hour or more when I worked. He was only six years old at the time, so that worried me a lot. I couldn't quit or I would lose my benefits.

Adding to these structural barriers (or perhaps compounded by them) are a variety of **personal issues** that many students bring with them to class on an almost daily basis, including: memories of childhood traumas, the effects of divorce and separation, problems with child-raising, alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. Despite their determination to succeed, the many stresses in their lives often get in the way of learning, forming what some students referred to as "blocks":

It's hard to concentrate on doing my work sometimes. Like, I have this problem on my mind. Some days I'd be working. I'd know the work but something would be wrong. I couldn't tell the teacher what was really wrong. I'm divorced now and the problems me and my ex-wife are going through gets to me. I can see myself giving up and it's stressful. But no matter how stressful it is, I keep pushing myself to go to school. I just keep telling myself I want to get to the end. To finish my school.

It's very stressful going to school and coming back to a family. It's like having two jobs. You go to school then come home and have to look after the family. I do my best to look after my kids and be with them. I love

them a lot. There are times when they go away and I'm sitting by myself and I miss my kids. There are mixed feelings. I'm doing it for them. Finish school, go to college then get a good job so I can look after my family better.

It's hard. Especially when I might be reading a story about a family or a child and then sometimes it will take me all day to read a paragraph. Or even you might hear some of the girls talking in class, "Oh my husband did this or my ex-husband did that" and that hurts me, because I know not all men are like that... It started to get to me real bad, but I want to get my grade 12. I don't care if I'm 90 years old I want to get my grade 12.

I almost gave it all up. But, if I gave it up, I'd have nothing. I'd have no home, no way to support my son. And I don't want to be on welfare again, that's for sure!

I missed a lot of school in December. My youngest son was suspended from school and my uncle died. My eldest son moved back with me and really disrupted things. I feel like I've fallen far behind with everything: housework, school work, everything. I gave up on my own life. I was living someone else's life; focusing on my eldest son's life instead on my own. He was becoming like his dad: stealing, violent, partying all the time. I finally had to let him go... Yesterday I couldn't concentrate. And a little today. But I just have to keep going. Like, I didn't come to school because I couldn't sleep the night before. I must have gone to sleep about 7 then I got up at 8 o'clock, but I was tired so I didn't feel like coming to school. But then I dragged myself out of bed and I came in the afternoon and I felt a little bit better. I thought, "I'm going to school no matter what." I just got up and got going. I have to. I can't just lay in bed and think... I'm managing to get back to my books again. I almost gave it all up. But, if I gave it up, I'd have nothing. I'd have no home, no way to support my son. And I don't want to be on welfare again, that's for sure!

Instructors have noticed a decline in the number of social assistance clients, and fewer referrals of low level learners

Effects of 'Welfare-to-Work' on Literacy Programming

Welfare reform has also impacted on literacy programs themselves. Instructors are now being encouraged to link literacy programming more closely with employment outcomes. Special funding has also been established for short-term employability training projects such as Literacy With an Employment Focus. While most instructors in the *LWW Study* were prepared to take on a greater role in preparing students for work, a large number of them lacked the information, supports, and resources needed to adapt to the changes.

In addition, many instructors were very concerned about the effect of welfare-to-work policies on their students' lives and on their overall programming. They felt that literacy training may not be given adequate consideration when case plans are negotiated, leading to a noticeable *decline in the number of social assistance clients, and fewer referrals of low level learners* by welfare workers.[10] Most social assistance clients who do enroll in literacy classes appear to be categorized as "unemployable" by their case

10 As has been previously noted, requests for statistical data on student demographics was consistently denied by several key government departments. Thus, it was difficult to determine whether the perceptions of instructors matched actual changes in the student population since the introduction of Welfare Reform.

worker and therefore have no immediate work expectations placed upon them.

Many learners have literacy levels that are too low for them to be job-ready, and this is not always understood by their workers.

We no longer have Level One learners. We have very few Level Two learners. They're either band-sponsored or they're Level Three. Most of our learners who are social assistance recipients are deemed unemployable and therefore they can come to our program with no consequences.

We don't have a lot of information on the welfare changes. In general though, the emphasis seems to be on getting job at all costs, no matter what the literacy level and upgrading needs of the learners may be. Many learners have literacy levels that are too low for them to be job-ready, and this is not always understood by their workers.

Probably the main thing that concerns me is the lack of referrals from the Province... I don't know what happens in the discussion between the case worker and the client, but my assumption would be that a lot of people get scared off... so people who come to us are either self-referred through friends or family, not by case workers... I've heard at least one student talking about their case worker saying, "Well, if you're well enough to go to a program, then you're well enough to work."

Education is a long, slow process that has to be supported. And I think that's the biggest problem of the counsellors because the policies don't allow them. Their mandate doesn't allow them to do that long-term, steady sort of solid background-building to get a good foundation and then to move on, it's more like 'Your child is six, you've got two years and then you're out the door.' What can you do in that time?

Instructors also expressed concern over the discretionary ways in which policies are implemented,the *unrealistic time constraints* placed upon students, as well as the *lack of student support services*, including child care, counselling, and transportation.

Instructor A: There are lots of barriers. It's getting in.Those who can get in, their sponsors are willing to support. But not all of them will let them in.

JS: So, does that vary from region to region?

Instructor A: Absolutely. It varies from community to community, from counsellor to counsellor in the city. There are some counsellors who say, "No, you are not going to school."

Instructor B: And if you go to school you don't get welfare.

Instructor C: They would rather you were on welfare and beating the street to find a job than going to school to get the proper training so you can get a job and be off welfare. It's almost like 'Be on welfare without an education or be on the street and do whatever you have to do.' That's where the system is lacking big time.

There's the expectation that people with children over six year of age should go out and get a job. However, I've found that the ones who come to the program are not any where near the level where they could go out and get a job.

It does depend on the counsellors. You still have the odd counsellor that honestly expects a person to go from a Level One student to a grade 12 in like four months. They are supposed to have all the education they need in four months, be employable and have a job at the end of it!

There are so many issues that are really beyond what you can do in a classroom program of this type. Until we get some kind of system where

there are resources for counselling, for building support groups, and all that stuff I don't think the possibility of these people getting jobs is very high.

Only a small minority of instructors felt that the recent welfare policies would be beneficial to students, depending on how they were carried out. These same instructors regarded sympathetic case workers as a necessary component to effective welfare-to-work plans.

Initially, I was appalled by the attitude of Income Security regarding the 'workfare' policy. But I have seen it work for several people. It forced them to think about their goals for the future and to put some concrete plans into place and then into motion ... Not all people are ready for this change, and for those people I feel that Income Security should be more supportive and encouraging rather than threatening.

The provincial counsellor here, if you're on assistance and have three months to look for a job and if you haven't found a job in three months then they will get together with you and say, "What's the problem?" If they analyse education as the problem they will send you to school.

I think overall some of the changes are very positive in that I think that the government, in it's own way and for it's own reasons, is trying to channel people towards employment. And I have seen some social assistance workers trying to look for opportunities for people and for the most part being relatively supportive of them ... So, I think that if it is carried out in the right way then it is a very positive thing but it is open to be misused.

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While workfare may get people off the welfare rolls in the short-term, many people cannot sustain themselves and their families on entry level wages and end up back on assistance, creating a revolving door syndrome.

Does workfare actually work? Is it fair?

Research has demonstrated beyond a doubt that long term investment in education is one of the best methods to move people off of social assistance and into sustainable employment. Workfare programs, on the other hand, have a very poor track record. Numerous studies have refuted both the success and the cost-effectiveness of workfare models throughout the world. While workfare may get people off the welfare rolls in the short-term, many people cannot sustain themselves and their families on entry level wages and end up back on assistance, creating a revolving door syndrome. In her evaluation of large-scale welfare to work initiatives in the United States, Dr. Debbie D'Amico concluded that these programs do not result in higher incomes or improved employability among social assistance recipients:

Two important concerns resound through most evaluations of large scale welfare to work efforts. Participants do not, by and large, acquire full time jobs at wages that can support families. This means they continue to receive public assistance, albeit less of it, and that they are likely to cycle, as has long been a characteristic of the majority on public assistance, between low wage, unstable wage work and welfare. (D'Amico: 1997, p. 15)

Other studies demonstrate similar results. In her evaluation of workfare programs in Manitoba, Shauna McKinnon states that, while there has been a

significant drop in the welfare case load since the inception of Bill 36, "there is absolutely no evidence that welfare reform has had any positive impact on poverty rates in Manitoba. The number of Manitobans living in poverty has risen from 18.1% in 1993 to 19.4% in 1997" (1999, p. 6). Since statistics are not available on what happens to social assistance recipients once they leave the welfare case load, one wonders where they have all gone. It is an issue that concerns many people working in the literacy field:

> *In the Spring of '96 we lost huge numbers of people. It's not been unsaid but it's really important. The client group - the students that we used to have - we don't have anymore. But they haven't gone away. They're still out there. They've slipped through another crack. One of our students is a good example of that. In the middle of last winter he was kicked off welfare and was working basically for chips and coke and a place to sleep, which meant a boarded-up room with no lock and a mattress on the floor and no heat... That's how he was living. That's where they go.*

Workfare does little to tackle the underlying causes of poverty. Rather, it places blame on individuals and takes the focus away from larger and more complex socio-economic and political issues such as unemployment, funding for adult education and job creation.

Given the overwhelming evidence of the importance of long-term education over short-term workfare programs, why then do governments continue to pursue these contradictory policies? The answers seem to lie in a combination of political and philosophical motives that focus on reducing the welfare budget rather than on sound economic or social policy evidence. Workfare does little to tackle the underlying causes of poverty. Rather, it places blame on individuals and takes the focus away from larger and more complex socio-economic and political issues such as unemployment, funding for adult education and job creation.

Workfare has also created a great deal of tension between adult educators and government agencies charged with implementing the reforms. One of the main sources of conflict seems to be the **lack of consultation** with educators and social assistance recipients themselves. Many instructors have begun to wonder whether basic adult education principles are being lost with welfare reform, but feel reluctant to "bite the hand that feeds them." One instructor summed up this over-riding sentiment most eloquently:

> *Most of our programs started out as literacy training, where we were just there to help people enrich their own lives, whether it's just being able to read a prescription bottle or get a driver's license for their personal use. Now, with welfare reform, there's more pressure on us to get people job-ready... You can bring these people in, get them ready in one year, but then where are they going to go for a job? If they do get a job, it will be the menial, low wage type. They can't support themselves on that, and so we create other problems. I, for one, am hesitant to support these reforms, but what can I do? My voice has not been listened to, but I remain here for the students.*

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PART III:

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

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Conclusions

What all workers and would-be workers need are opportunities for jobs at living wages and for education that helps them advance as far as their aspirations and abilities will take them.

(D'Amico: 1997, p. viii)

Literacy education, while not a "cure-all", is a crucial stepping stone for low-literate adults who want to improve their basic skills and confidence levels, and to pursue higher education and/or employment.

The three-year *Literacy, Welfare and Work Study* set out to examine the complex relationship between literacy and employment within the context of Welfare Reform in Manitoba. The research placed adult learners at the centre of the analysis, attempting to link their individual and collective stories to a larger socioeconomic and political framework. Using ethnographic methods such as interviews and participant observation, the research described and analysed the many factors that affect adult learners' lives, including poverty, abuse, unemployment, as well as social policies such as Workfare. This holistic approach offers a more fully contextualized understanding of learners' lives and the role that literacy plays in employment.

The research makes a strong case for the importance of long term investment in education as one of the best methods we know of to lift people out of poverty and into sustainable employment. Literacy education, while not a "cure-all", is a crucial stepping stone for low-literate adults who want to improve their basic skills and confidence levels, and to pursue higher education and/or employment. Workfare, on the other hand, has been proven to be an ineffective and costly social policy that does little to solve the problem of poverty and unemployment. Rather, it tends to further punish those who are trying to get ahead by placing unrealistic time limits on education and pushing people into low wage, entry level jobs.

The research not only outlines the current challenges faced by adult literacy students and programs, but also offers some concrete suggestions regarding the kinds of policies, programs and support services that best enable adult learners to move from welfare to work. These 10 Recommendations emerged from primary interviews with literacy instructors, students, and other key informants as well as secondary sources such as Dr. Debbie D'Amico's review of large-scale welfare-to-work initiatives in the U.S (1997), Dr. Susan Hoddinott's national study of access to Adult Basic Education programs and services in Canada (1998), and the Manitoba Chamber of Commerce Resolutions on Literacy, passed on May 16th, 1999.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1

· Raise public awareness & support for literacy

Our country has an unacceptably high rate of low literacy. As a society, we must examine the underlying causes of low literacy and commit to the life-long development of literacy skills among our citizens. We must continue to remove the stigma attached to low literacy, while at the same time renewing the value we place on education as a basic human right. To this end, a *large-scale, national and provincial public awareness campaign on literacy issues and solutions should be implemented as soon as possible.*

Recommendation #2

· Increase funding to literacy programs

Once public awareness is raised, it is reasonable to suggest that demands for literacy services will increase. Many programs are already seriously underfunded and understaffed, and have long waiting lists. Quality educational programming requires an adequate and stable source of funding.

The Provincial and federal governments must continue to increase both core and special project funding to adult literacy programs throughout the province. Special consideration must be given to the unique needs of women, persons with disabilities, and northern, rural and Aboriginal communities when funding strategies are developed.

> *If you accept the premise that it is the government's responsibility to oversee education to the Grade 12 level and that all students, regardless of age, should have access to this education unencumbered by tuition fees and (other) costs, then it only makes sense that the funding for these programs should be (allocated) from the education budget.* (Hoddinott: 1998, p. 204)

Recommendation #3

· Enhance existing resources & technology in literacy classrooms

With improved funding comes the ability to purchase better resource materials and improved technology such as computers, audio and video equipment. The Manitoba Chamber of Commerce calls for the "development of a process to integrate state-of-the-art technology and internet access in all literacy programs" (Literacy Partners of Manitoba). More money also allows literacy programs to pay qualified instructors a better wage, hire additional support staff, and to provide staff with on-going professional development opportunities.

Recommendation #4

· Review and revise current welfare-to-work strategies

Access to education must be viewed as a right, not a privilege. Policies that obstruct full access to education (such as current welfare-to-work strategies) should be immediately evaluated and revised. Clients who wish to attend education and training programs on a full-time basis should be encouraged to do so, and unrealistic time limits and other barriers to learning should be removed. On-going professional development of case workers must include basic adult learning theory, assessment of literacy needs and sensitivity training.

Adults must not be *forced* to attend educational programming, nor should they have to juggle job search requirements with schooling, unless they choose to do so. Welfare payments must be immediately increased to reflect the cost of living, housing markets, etc. Single parents with children over the age of six should not be forced to look for work or attend school. Raising a child should be viewed as work and these parents should be offered a number of options such as family literacy classes, distance education and other personal or employment support programming.

Recommendation #5

· Increase student supports & access to programs

People on social assistance should be given plain language *information* on programs that are available to them and *supports that enable them to both access and remain in these programs*. These supports include adequate funding, childcare, transportation, and counselling services.

> *At the very minimum, Adult Basic Education programs must have good quality, affordable day care facilities, parking, easily accessible transit and personal counselors on site. Many adult learners have multi-barriers. We must make every effort to ensure that their educational experience is as simple and straightforward as possible. Once they start upgrading, they will have enough struggles. They (shouldn't) have to worry about the quality of daycare, getting home in time to meet their kids, and dealing with stresses on their own.*
> (Hoddinott: 1998, p. 200)

Recommendation #6

· Create a wider variety of programming options to meet client needs

Literacy programs and training aimed at preparing people for work cannot be "one-size-fits-all". A variety of *non-mandatory* programming options should be offered to clients, including pre-employment training (job search, resumé writing, interview skills, etc.), on-the-job training and job "shadowing", as well as education programs such as literacy, GED, mature student diploma, and university or college. Participant goals should be reviewed and revised with each client on a regular basis. Specialized programming and assessment must also be made available *at no additional cost* to clients with learning disabilities and other special needs. It is imperative that those students who choose to pursue literacy up-grading for personal (not employment-related) reasons should also be supported.

Recommendation #7

· Coordinate the links between literacy programming and other educational/employmentopportunities

For many learners, literacy programming is not an end in itself. It is seen as a necessary stepping stone to further educational opportunities and/or employment. Presently however, there are few *coordinated* links between literacy programming and higher education programs such as secondary education, mature student programs, and colleges or universities. Most employers do not recognize Level 1- 4 Certificates that are offered by the provincial literacy office. Literacy students must have the *option* to pursue and receive academic credits from literacy programs that can then be transferred to other institutions.

A Literacy Task Force comprised of adult educators, learners, business, labour and government representatives must be set up to develop a coordinated strategy for the province. Among other things, this Task Force would examine the issue of certification and academic standards for literacy programming, and would develop a variety of low-cost, creative solutions that would more effectively link literacy programming to other educational and/or employment opportunities.

> *Be it resolved that the Government of Manitoba formulate a Task Force to oversee the development and implementation of a coordinated, long-term strategy to improve literacy in Manitoba (Manitoba Chamber of Commerce* AGM, May 16, 1999)

Recommendation #8

· Improve communication and collaboration among all stake holders

If we are to remove barriers to education, there must be improved communication and collaboration between adult educators, policy-makers, learners and others. A formalized process for consultation (such as the Literacy Task Force) should be put in place where stake holders can share information and take action to develop common goals, policies, and programs that best support the needs of adult learners.

Recommendation #9

· Involve learners in decision-making

All too often, policies and programs are developed without clients' full input and participation. This report has shown that the majority of students demonstrate a strong commitment to learning, and a keen understanding of the issues that affect their lives. Their input, from the classroom to the Task Force level, is necessary if we are to develop policies that result in real, lasting, and positive change.

Recommendation #10

· Enhance job creation and raise the minimum wage

It has been noted that no amount of education or training can solve the problem of a lack of 'real jobs'. If literacy programs are to continue to assist students to become more employable, there must be concrete opportunities for jobs that pay more than minimum wage at part-time hours. There must be a combined effort at the governmental and private sector levels to create better-paying jobs and to gradually raise the minimum wage to meet the rising costs of living.

> *Without at least some job creation, the welfare reform initiative is doomed to fail, and to disappoint and impoverish the thousands of individuals who faithfully execute the required steps toward employment and never find jobs. The resulting waste of human talent, effort and public investment is unacceptable from the standpoint of economic development. Job creation can position individuals to rebuild the infrastructure of cities, to assist struggling families, and to meet other critical social and economic needs. Job creation could provide clear outcomes for work experience programme participants and direct their workfare into job training for real jobs. (D'Amico:1997 p.67)*

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Afterword

As the final chapter of this report was being written, provincial elections were held in Manitoba. The newly elected NDP government promised to enhance education and training services and to repeal workfare legislation. While it is still too early to determine how the new government will respond to the needs of the literacy community, it is my hope that the *LWW Study* will contribute positively to the on-going debate and policy development regarding literacy, welfare and work.

Janet Smith

Bonnie's Story

The following story was written by one of the seven adult learners who participated in the case study for the Literacy, Welfare & Work Longitudinal Research Project.

***

When I was in my late 20's, I wanted to go back to school to improve my literacy skills. I wanted to better myself in the areas of communication, working with people, and to better my way of life. I wanted to feel good about myself and to help other people. It took me many years to make the final decision to go back to school. I was 40 years old when I joined my first literacy program.

My original goals were to get office skills. These goals changed as I continued my education. I decided I wanted to work with people in a helping capacity, but I wasn't sure how yet. I also wanted to get my Grade 12. I knew I needed a Grade 12 in order to get a good job. I didn't want to be a waitress and work at minimum wage all my life.

I went to the literacy program part-time for three years, working as a waitress in the mornings and going to school in the afternoons. My boss told me that my work had improved since I started to take literacy classes. I could talk to the customers better, make change, and was generally a happier person. But I was also very tired, trying to work and go to school. My literacy teacher helped me to write a letter to my band to ask for funding so that I could go to school full time, but they did not let me. Social assistance also turned me down.

When the restaurant where I worked closed down, I went on Unemployment Insurance. I asked my worker if I could go back to school. At first he denied my request, but he also realized how important it was to me, and he knew that this was the only way I would realize my goals. You have to have a good education if you are to get a good job. After so many years of trying to go to school full-time, I finally got funding!

In the years I was a literacy student my skills have improved a great deal. I went from a Grade 5 reading, writing and math level to getting my Grade 12 High School certificate in five years. My strongest subjects are math and computers. I am still having some trouble with English, but it is improving all the time.

Literacy has changed my life for the better. If I had not taken literacy classes, I would have still been working in a minimum wage job or dependent upon social assistance. I would have been a loner, staying at home all the time and not communicating with many people. Because of what I have learned, I can read more. I understand and use bigger words when I speak. I use a dictionary when I don't understand something, and I never used to do that. My math is improved, and I am more in control of my finances. I write letters now, even to the Premier of Manitoba! I can also fill out application forms and have written a good resumé.

Literacy has also made me a happier person within. I am a better mother and grandmother. I read to my grandchildren and teach them what I have learned. They are proud of me for going back to school, and I am a good example for them to follow. I also have more confidence now. In the past year, I have made presentations in my classroom and did public speaking at a recent literacy play (see newspaper article - Appendix). I also participated in a two year study about my life and the lives of other adult learners.

Most importantly, literacy has helped me to feel more determined to succeed in whatever I do. One of my plans is to be a volunteer tutor for others who have trouble reading and writing, sharing what I have learned with others. The most important lesson I have learned is that:

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER!

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Appendix

STAGE ONE LEARNERS:

If the learner says she or he cannot read at all, can barely sign his or her name, would have difficulty with simple reading or writing tasks, then this learner is most likely a Stage One Learner. People who read at this level are able to read with assistance, parts of some of the following kinds of materials: basic banking items, labels (grocery and pharmacy items), signs (street, store, entrance, exit, etc.) and everyday items (menus, Yellow Pages, bills).

Introductory work will focus on: language experience stories, introduction of the alphabet and the notions of print, word recognition activities, photo stories, listening to stories on tape, listening to others read, doing assisted reading with a tutor or teacher.

STAGE TWO LEARNERS:

People reading at this level can do some independent reading; however, they are still very hesitant and uncomfortable with the reading process. They tend to believe that reading should be perfect and often try to figure out every word. If the learner can read some headlines, can write simple sentences (even if these have spelling errors in them), can read basic literacy text, then the learner should be working on the following:

- Developing writing skills - especially writing for a variety of purposes with some beginning ideas of how to organize ideas, inventing spelling for the purposes of writing, learning spelling words from their writing, practising silent reading, doing assisted reading of more difficult texts with other tutors or teachers, developing an understanding of what they are reading, etc.

STAGE THREE LEARNERS:

People reading at this level can read longer parts of texts, but may be unsure that they have understood the text. They also tend to read quickly, skimming over parts of the text or parts of words which are critical for real understanding of a piece. Stage 3 writers are composing longer passages (one page or more) and are working to organize their ideas clearly into paragraphs.

These learners are people getting reading for college, further training or GED. For the most part, these learners will need the most guidance in: developing a variety of writing skills (e.g. essay writing, proofreading, re-drafting and re-writing, styles of writing), indivualized spelling for their own particular needs, reading comprehension vocabulary development and advanced reading assignments.

For more information on the

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Copies can be ordered from:

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Also available from the NALD database
http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/lwwfinal/cover.htm

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Canadian Council for Learning OpportunitiesFor Women (CCLOW)	47 Main Street Toronto, Ontario M4E 2V6 Tel: 416-699-1909 Fax: 416-669-2145
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